

ON THE DERIVATION OF THE GENERIC NAME *ILIAMNA* (MALVACEAE)

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Edward Lee Greene is well known as a classics scholar and a botanist with strong opinions. His prowess as a classics scholar is well attested to by his historical work (Greene 1909). His idiosyncratic ideas are too well known to need documentation. But this combination of characteristics leads to some interesting speculations with regard to certain generic names that he proposed. In particular, we deal here with the name *Iliamna*, which he proposed for a genus of western American Malvaceae (Wiggins 1936).

In publishing the name, Greene (1906) did not state how he chose the name or offer any indication of its derivation. Other sources indicate its origin to be unknown (e.g. Gleason 1952; Genaust 1983) or at least mysterious (“Greek, significance obscure”: Hitchcock & Cronquist 1973).

Our first considerations of the question took into account Greene’s classical learning and led us to the roots *ilyos* (Greek: mud) and *amnis* (Latin: pertaining to a river), which makes a certain amount of sense, since the plants concerned occur in wet habitats. However, it seemed unlikely that Greene would have mixed Greek and Latin roots, so this derivation left us unsatisfied.

We next serendipitously discovered that there is a place name in Alaska, Iliamna, applied to a bay, a lake, a point, a village, and a volcano. The native name of the lake was reported as Oz[e]ro Bol[schi] Ilyamna on the 1852 Russian Hydrog. Dept. Chart 1455. This feature was earlier called Ozyero Shelekhovo on an 1802 Russian map. According to G.G. Martin, USGS, Iliamna is said to be “the name of a mythical great blackfish, supposed to inhabit this lake, which bites holes in the bidarkas [boats] of bad natives” (Orth 1967). The volcano’s name was published by the Russians (Orth 1967) as *Sopka Ilymna* (Capt. M.D. Tebenkov, 1852, map # 5). It has therefore been suggested that the Russian name *Ilym* is the root, but this is speculative.

We presume that Greene encountered the name, liked the sound of it, and found an occasion to apply it botanically. But did he apply it because of its sound or because of its meaning? Is the origin of the name Russian or Amerindian? The genus *Iliamna* does not occur in Alaska; its species have their northernmost limit in British Columbia.

We have now learned that what appears to be the “true” derivation of the

geographical name, which Greene presumably appropriated for botanical purposes. The Dena'ina are an Athabascan people of Cook Inlet and the Alaska Peninsula where the geographical name was used. Their name *Nilamna* (phonetically) was modified by the early Russian colonists into *Iliamna*. The name derives from two words, *nila* (islands) and *vena* (lake), that is, "islands in the lake." We are grateful to Lydia Black of the Anthropology Department, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, for this information.

Thus, although we now know the derivation of the name *Iliamna*, we remain in the dark as to why Greene chose it as a botanical name. He may have simply liked the sound of it, but it is also possible that he chose it to confound his botanical critics into seeking a classical derivation of a name that did not have classical roots.

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